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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on the belief that a prerequisite to literacy education and to all teaching is accepting and caring about the students. Eighteen education students' responses to two children's books, "Chevrolet Saturdays" and "My Name is Maria Isabel," were compiled. From the comments, the following attributes were identified as being important for successful relationships between teachers and students: warmth, credibility, high expectations for success, and an encouraging and supportive attitude. Recommendations are: (1) education students should be screened for the above attributes before admission; (2) students should be exposed to these attributes in every education course; and (3) students' progress in developing these attributes should be continuously monitored. (EF)

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Literacy Is About "Teacher Caring"

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Literacy Is About "Teacher Caring"

Introduction

"Even before Joey saw Mrs. Hamlin standing by the classroom door, her thin lips pressed together, he knew this was going to be a bad Thursday." Joey, the main character in *Chevrolet Saturdays*, is a fifth grade student struggling to adjust to a new stepfather and a teacher who he concludes does not like him nor does she like teaching. Much of Mrs. Hamlin's behavior in the book *Chevrolet Saturdays* supports Joey's conclusion. Joey remembers that mornings had been so different last year in Mrs. Adler's room. Even with his parent's divorce, life had been better because of his fourth grade teacher. But she really liked me, Joey thought. And she was a good teacher, not like Mrs. Hamlin.

In the book "My Name is Maria Isabel, Maria Isabel, born in Puerto Rico, wants desperately to fit in at her new school. Her third grade teacher greets her with a smile and asks her name. Maria Isabel states "Maria Isabel Salazar Lopez." The teacher informs her that she already has two Marias in her class so she will be called Mary. Maria stares at the name , Mary, and thinks how proud she is to be named after two grandmothers and her father and grandfather. "Mary. Mary Lopez. Mary Lopeez," her teacher calls out.

"I'm talking to you, Mary." The teacher was now right by her desk, looking at Maria Isabel with a mix of surprise and impatience. Maria Isabel slumps down in her seat.... She doesn't know how to tell the teacher that she just doesn't recognize herself in that strange new name.

Both characters, Joey and Maria, are victims of teacher insensitivity and in Joey's case a very uncaring teacher who perhaps should not be teaching at all. Fortunately for Maria Isabel, her teacher recognizes her mistake and reverses her decision and perceptions

of Maria. In Joey 's case however, he endures a horrible year with Mrs. Hamlin but things are made bearable with the support of the principal, his family, and friends.

I am a literacy professor and by definition I am to prepare teachers to teach reading and the language arts and to teach students how to learn from text in the content areas. However, I feel that a prerequisite to all teaching is to accept and care about the students. This idea is not new but so often we relegate it to our generic teaching/learning course and fail to mention it again. Since classrooms are becoming more and more diverse and the teaching force remains predominantly white, the importnce of an accepting classroom environment should be a strand in all method courses . With this thought in mind, I decided to use children's literature books to initiate and discuss the teachers' role of accepting and caring for students in their classrooms.

Teachers need to feel comfortable with themselves in order to make students feel comfortable in the classroom. They need to accept and understand their own shortcomings and prejudices before they can accept their students. It is imperative that teachers monitor their own classroom behavior so as to accord all students equity in the learning process. Each classroom should be safe, predictable, and a haven for learning.

One of the assignments in my Reading/Language arts class for those preparing to teach in grades 1-9 is to read two children's books: *Maria Isabel and Chevrolet Saturdays*. This past fall, eighteen education students read the books and responded to problems experienced in school by the main characters, Maria and Joey, with comments as to how they (education students) felt about the problems.

The article includes some students' responses to both books and a brief summaryof these responses as they relate to classroom teachers.

SOME RESPONSES TO THE BOOK "MARIA ISABEL"

Ada, Almar. (1993). *My Name is Maria Isabel*. Athenum Books for Young Readers
Main Characters: Maria and Teacher
Setting: Third grade at a new school in the U.S.
Plot: Maria Isabel, born in Puerto Rico, wants desperately to fit in at her new school. Her teacher informs her that she already has two Marias in her class, so she will be called Mary. Maria forgets to answer to the name Mary, which leads to her being excluded from the Winter Pageant.

Problem	Education Students" Responses
Chapter 2	
P.8 "We already have two Marias in this class. Why don't we call you Mary instead?"	-Always respect the students' names and learn to pronounce them correctly -Ask students what they would like to be called -Several students with the same may be addressed by the first name and initial of their last name -A very insensitive thing to say because her name is her identity -Teacher lacks cultural understanding of importance of family name in Latino culture -Saying a student's name incorrectly prohibits a respectful student bond -This will cause the student to shut down
P.9 On the inside cover, the teacher	-A name is very personal.

had written Mary Lopez	her name was part of her family and she treasured it. -Never translate a child's name into an English version -Place nametag on students with correct name -When you change her name you change her identity
P.12 "Mary. Mary Lopez," her teacher called out, her voice rising higher and higher.	-Never put a student in such an uncomfortable position. Her name should be cherished not changed. -Never yell and get impatient with a new student Yelling makes the student feel lousy and that he/she is a mess-up
<u>Chapter 3</u> P. 17 If only her teacher would not insist on calling her Mary	I felt really bad for what Maria was experiencing. Students' uniqueness should be respected -The teacher was scary and unapproachable -It is important to find out a student's history and back-ground
<u>Chapter 4</u> P. 20-22"Would Mary Lopez tell us what she knows about the Pilgrims?" Maria Isabel didn't answer. Her teacher was getting angry. She glared at Maria Isabel and said, "When I ask you something you have to answer, Mary.	A teacher should never become angry at a student. The teacher never asked Maria why she didn't respond to Mary. -Communication is crucial for a positive learning environment.

	-Teacher should keep cool and maintain composure -Maria wonders how she can be proud of her name if she is called by another name -Maria is needlessly put on the spot -Teachers should know that students are not always focused on school when they are in school
Chapter 5	
P.29 Maria Isabel was so busy trying to finish the paper that she didn't hear the teacher call out in an irritated tone of voice, Mary Lopez!" When at last she realized the teacher was waiting for an answer from her, Maria had no idea what the question had been. "Well it looks like Mary doesn't want to take part in our Winter Pageant."	-It was awful the way the teacher excluded Maria from the pageant. I would never keep a student from participating in such an important event. -Meet with Maria privately and find out the problem -Ask to see Maria after class to address the situation -Ask Maria if there are any problems she would like to talk about
Chapter 7	
P. 42...If only there was some way I could let her know...and not make the teacher angry all the time...	-Read non-verbal clues to discover when a student is uncomfortable -Try to remember how intimidating a teacher can be
Chapter 9	
P. 49-51 Maria Isabel wrote that	-A brave move by Maria Isabel.

her greatest wish was to be called
"Maria Isabel Salazar Lopez"

She knew the teacher might not
appreciate the note
-I want students to
speak their minds because then
we will know each other better

Chapter 10 Resolution

P. 54 Then she heard the teacher say, "Maria Isabel, Maria Isabel Salazar Lopez." Maria looked up in amazement.

"Wouldn't you like to lead the song about the Hanukkah candles?" the teacher said with a wide grin. "Why don't you start by yourself, and then everyone else can join in. Go ahead and start when you're ready."

Maria Isabel walked nervously up to the front of the room and stood next to the teacher, who was strumming her guitar. Then she took a deep breath and began to sing her favorite hoilday song.

SOME RESPONSES TO THE BOOK "CHEVROLET SATURDAYS

Boyd, Candy Dawson. (1993). *Chevrolet Saturdays*, Puffin Books

Main Characters: Joey, Mr. Johnson, Doc, Mrs Hamlin (teacher), Joey's Mom, Mrs. Mack (principal)
Setting: A neighborhood in Berkley, CA
Plot: After the remarriage of his mother, Joey struggles to adjust to his stepfather. Joey also clashes with his 5th grade teacher, who he thinks doesn't like him. Joey misses his father and attempts to resolve many issues.

Problem	Education Students' Responses
Chapter 1 P.7 Before him stretched another endless school day with Mrs. Hamlin, his fifth grade teacher	-I hope to inspire the children to look forward to school, not dread it. A teacher is to inspire and motivate students to learn.
P. 8 Even before Joey saw Mrs. Hamlin standing by the classroom door, her thin lips pressed together, he knew this was going to be a bad Thursday.	-Body language is an important and significant way of portraying emotions. I will communicate positive body language and self esteem to my students.
P.9 Suddenly Mrs. Hamlin was right beside him. "Well, you have a brain even though you don't use it much.	-Negativity and mean words are cruel and unnecessary. respect and value all of my students
P.10 Most of the class time was spent dealing with that bunch	It is a waste of time to continually deal with classroom management.

	-I will utilize cooperative learning, hands-on activities, and other ways to avoid confrontations with students
P. 10 Mrs. Hamlin's voice screeched like a piece of chalk dragged across the blackboard	I really detest teachers that yell! I will control my anger and affectively confront management issues. Positive reinforcement is always better than negative.
P. 11 Joey began writing equation . twent-five times.	What a waste of time, writing the same thing over and over! Meaningful learning is crucial to the success of the students.
P.12 "Joey, why aren't you working?"	Unstimulating activities will bore the children. It is up to the educator to provide interesting and thought-provoking material.
P.13 Our teacher doesn't like him or any of us. All she does is holler and yell.	Yelling is such a waste of time and energy. I will appreciate and cherish all students.
P.14 "She doesn't like science, so we only read the book and answer questions."	I will express my fascination for learning, and relate to my students how important it is to be a lifelong learner.
P.15 Joey took a seat in the office. Fifteen minutes later, Mrs. Hamlin called the office and asked that Joey be sent back to his classroom.	-Wasted time in the office does not benefit the student. -The teacher avoids responsi-bility for her teaching and blames the children.

P. 16 There's no way Mrs. Hamlin will refer me to the gifted program. She thinks I'm lazy and dumb.	-I felt angry for the way Joey felt. Students need to feel special and worthwhile!
P.16 "Well at least some children in this room know how to behave. I am pleasantly surprised."	I will be surprised at bad behavior not good behavior.
P.16 "Line up and walk out" she said. "And Joey, don't forget to bring that note back, signed. "I want your parents to know that your lack of concentration is a serious problem."	It angers me that the teacher never considered herself responsible for problems. -Joey was a bright student that did not receive the positive reinforcement that he deserved.
Chapter 2	
P. 24 "She says you show little or no interest in school."	-It is very difficult for a child to be interested in school when they feel unappreciated and are yelled at all the time.
Chapter 3	
P. 34 "Joey, you can't get your homework in on time or pay attention. How can I trust you to handle this?" With a wide gesture she dismissed him	A trusting and kind teacher is what I will be. Encouraging and supporting the children should be foremost in the classroom environment.
P. 51 "D.J., why do you think Mrs. Hamlin hates me?" "I don't think she hates you. I think she doesn't like teaching."	An educator must love learning and children. I will promote the quest for knowledge and positive self esteem.
P.69 "Your grades are terrible. You	Telling a child the bad things

seem as if you can't focus when I am teaching. You have difficulty staying with a task. You have a serious attention deficit and need special help, Joey."	all the time is dreadful. This was a terrible teacher who didn't relate to the students.
P. 76 "Mrs Hamlin is a new teacher and may not know the proper procedures to follow before-"	-Making excuses for the teacher was wrong of the principal. -I will attempt to know all the required procedures and rules.
P.78 He handed her the envelope. Mrs. Hamlin glared as she read the contents	-What a mean teacher! The emotional abuse that she heaps on Joey is merciless.
P. 105 What did you do now, Joey	The constant berating of Joey just reinforced his perception of her as mean and cruel

Summary

Clearly the problem between Maria Isabel and her teacher was one of communication. Maria could have been spared a lot of unhappiness had she said up front that she did not want to be called Mary, or if the teacher had just referred to her as Maria Isabel because certainly no one else had her middle name. It is understandable that Maria was hesitant to disagree with the teacher because of cultural conditioning to think the teacher knows best, or developmentally she was not mature enough to defend herself against an adult. However, it is inexcuseable for a teacher to change the name of a student, especially without asking permission. In the case of Robert, William, Katherine, Elizabeth, and other such names which may be shortened, teachers should always ask what name a student prefers.

As stated in the introduction, Joey's teacher never made him feel very comfortable in the classroom. And, as is the case with so many students who have ineffective teachers, Joey endured his school year.

Based on the terminology used in the book, *The Act of Teaching* (Cruickshank, Bainer, and Metcalf, 1999), students' responses to *Chevrolet Saturdays* suggest that Mrs. Hamil lacks the personality attributes listed below.

1. Warmth-conveyed by her body language and refusal to consider opinions, feelings, and ideas of students (when Joey wanted to take care of the science center) Warmth is exhibited through positive interpersonal relationships.

2. Credibility- when students stated that Mrs. Hamil didn't like science because the class only read the science textbook and answered questions. Credibility is student perception of teacher ability and effectiveness and how the topics presented relate to student needs and interests.

3. High Expectations for Success- Joey knew that Mrs. Hamil would never recommend him for the gifted program because she considered him lazy and dumb.

3. High Expectations for Success- Joey knew that Mrs. Hamil would never recommend him for the gifted program because she considered him lazy and dumb. Teachers should believe that all students can learn and that they (teachers) are capable of helping all students master the content.

4. An Encouraging and Supportive Attitude- refusal to address Joey's need and desire to be responsible for the science center and her failure to compliment him for a job well done. Teachers should address students' need to belong ,to be liked, and to be successful.

It is debateable whether or not the above attributes can be taught. Dunkin and Biddle (1974) in *The Study of Teaching* refer to these attributes as presage variables. Evidence of these qualities should be present in all education students, then, they can be developed and honed. First students should be screened based on some of the above attributes prior to admission to teacher education, Second, they should be exposed to the above attributes in every education course. Third, students' progress in developing these attributes should be continuously monitored.

Literacy education is, and will continue to be about teaching prospective teachers to teach reading/language arts and to have teachers develop the expertise needed to help students process text, but it is also much more, in that, literacy education teaches education students to become caring classroom teachers.

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MY NAME IS

María Isabel

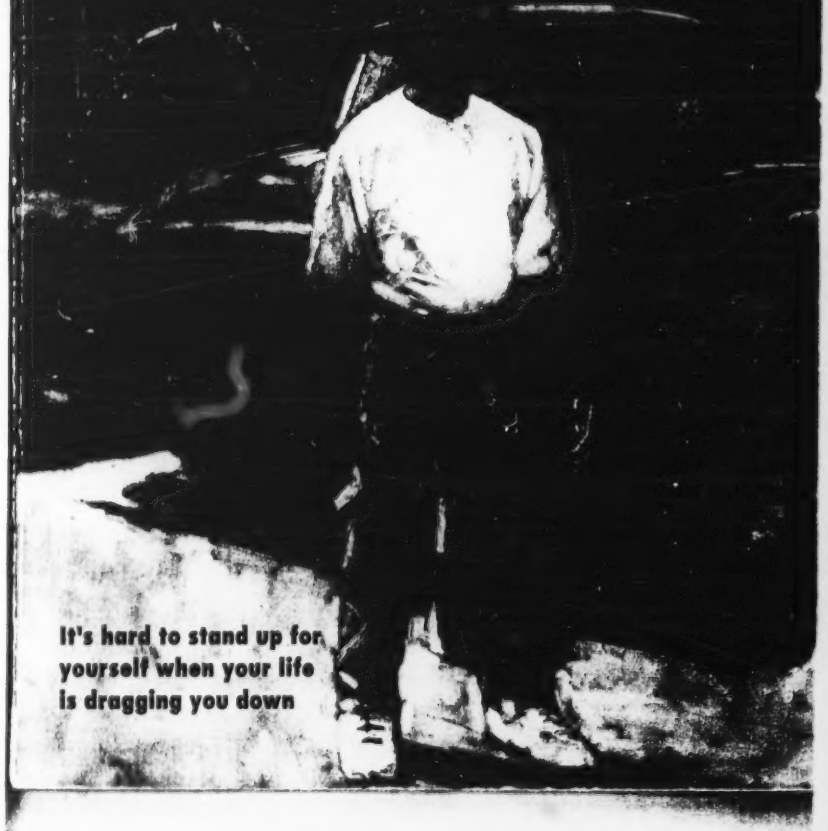
by Alma Flor Ada

illustrated by K. Dyble Thompson

A PUFFIN BOOK

Candy Dawson Boyd

Chevrolet Saturdays



It's hard to stand up for yourself when your life is dragging you down

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